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Erratum

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Pace Ward

Edited by Dr. Tim Earley

In his mythical and prophetic poem "Visions of the Daughters of Albion," William Blake details the rape of Oothoon, the "soft soul of America," by Bromion, leading to her separation from her former counterpart, Theotormon (line 3). This narrative acts as a display of Blake's beliefs concerning the inhibition of perception, the nature of human identity, and the roots of oppression. The Enlightenment taught that human perception is reliant on the five senses. This belief aligns with essentialist philosophies that argue that the nature of human identity lies in the perceivable embodiment of an individual because one's "essence," or the nature of his or her soul, relies on a set of sensible attributes. In the poem, Bromion manipulates Oothoon's perceived identity by raping Oothoon, stripping her of her virginity and, thus, her purity as perceived by Theotormon. This manipulation displays how patriarchal perspectives in the context of essentialism can lead to proprietary passions and distaste through envy.

Throughout "Visions of the Daughters of Albion," the characters participate in an extensive discourse on the extent of human perception. Oothoon addresses this theme often,

especially in her response to the Theotormon's refusal to continue being her lover, as she wishes, because of her "defiled bosom" and her inability to "reflect / The image of Theotormon on [her] pure / transparent breast" (lines 38-39). She attempts to persuade Theotormon, after calling for his eagles "to prey upon her flesh," into forgiving her for having her "virgin mantle" torn "in twain" by Bromion (line 36; "The Argument"). Initially, she does so by explaining her understanding of the passage of time. She believes that the passing of time and repentance would lead to forgiveness and a reclamation of purity. She pleads to Theotormon, "I cry arise O Theotormon for the village dog / Barks at the breaking day... and the Eagle returns / from nightly prey, and lifts his golden beak to the pure east; / Shaking the dust from his immortal pinions to awake / The sun that sleeps too long. Arise my Theotormon I am pure." She begins to understand how human perception itself has been altered since the destruction of the paradise that Oothoon once wandered (lines 46-51). This alteration can be characterized as the inhibition of infinite perception into a limited perception that is completely reliant on the five senses. This theme

first appears in an epiphany Oothoon experiences: "They told me that the night & day were all that I could see; / They told me that I had five senses to inclose me up. / And they inclos'd my infinite brain into a narrow circle, / And sunk my heart into the Abyss" (lines 53-55). This epiphany makes Oothoon question the permanent destruction of her purity in the eyes of Theotormon, and Theotormon's refusal to forgive her.

Through Oothoon's and Theotormon's dialogue, Blake utilizes multiple metaphors. These present and criticize Enlightenment-era beliefs about human perception and its effect on identity. These metaphors could be seen as a response to John Locke's "Essay Concerning Human Understanding," in which Locke writes that "...men can get all the knowledge they have, and can arrive at certainty about some things, purely by using their natural faculties, without help from any innate notions or principles." For example, Oothoon begins using multiple examples found in nature of understanding beyond experience through the senses: "With what sense is it that the chicken shuns the ravenous hawk?... / With what sense does the bee form cells? have not the mouse & frog / Eyes and ears and sense of touch? yet are their habitations. / And their pursuits, as different as their forms and as their joys:" (lines 63-67). The "joys" that Oothoon mentions suggest Blake's belief that Desire or Energy is of the Body and is the only Good, and that

Reason is the binding outward circumference of Desire, but Theotormon's response to these questions presents an opposing side to the argument. Theotormon questions the physical source for such joys: "Tell me what is a thought? & of what substance is it made? / Tell me what is a joy? & in what gardens do joys grow? / And in what rivers swim the sorrows?" (lines 84-86). It is Theotormon's conclusion—that human perception relies solely on empirical experiences—that explains his behavior in response to Oothoon's having been raped and impregnated by Bromion.

However, while Theotormon may express distaste for Oothoon's lapsed purity, his reactionary behavior is described as the result of envy. Blake describes Theotormon's response to Bromion's proprietary declaration of having impregnated Oothoon: "Then storms rent Theotormon's limbs; he rolld his waves around. / And folded his black jealous waters round the adulterate pair... / With secret tears; beneath him sound like waves on a desert shore" (lines 26-30). Theotormon becomes jealous. He reasons that, because of the physical characteristics of the events he has witnessed, Oothoon has lost her innocence and virginity. However, had he observed the nature of Oothoon's soul—which, according to the beliefs of the Age of Reason, is imperceptible due to its extension beyond that which is conceivable through sensory

experience—he would have heeded Oothoon's lamentations and understood that those contingent occurrences in the embodiment of an individual are not related to his or her soul's essence.

Furthermore, Bromion represents the misuse of essentialist language by utilizing it to achieve ownership. It is through Bromion's understanding that Blake displays the conception of the permissibility of oppression. For example, Blake describes Oothoon "on his [Bromion's] stormy bed, / Lay the faint maid, and soon her woes appall'd his thunders hoarse" (lines 16-17). Oothoon is described as a maid, indicating that she still possesses purity. Contrarily, Bromion, who, along with Theotormon, has constructed a patriarchal world in which Oothoon lives: "Spoke. behold this harlot here on Bromions bed," (line 18). Bromion has manipulated the idea of Reason as solely empirical; as soon as he takes Oothoon's virginity, she is demoted from a maiden to a harlot. Bromion elaborates on this patriarchal manipulation of Reason when he says, "Now thou maist marry Bromions harlot, and protect the child / of Bromions rage that Oothoon shall put forth in nine moons time" (lines 24-25). This declaration works to instill envy in Theotormon as a result of the patriarchal world they have constructed. In this unjust world, Bromion's taking of Oothoon's virginity, however forcefully, means that he possesses her forever.

Oothoon continues throughout the rest of the poem to pose multiple arguments, both comparative and rhetorical, for the lack of causality between contingent occurrences that affect the embodiment of an individual and the essence of his or her soul. The interspersed lamentations also work to further Blake's argument that the fulfilment of desire is the source of utmost joy, specifically in a context of sexual liberation. For example, she criticizes the accepted moral law of her belonging to her rapist: "Till she who burns with youth. and knows no fixed lot; is bound / In spells of law to one she loaths: and must she drag the chain / Of life, in weary lust!" (lines 132-134). These lines are meant to portray Oothoon's belief that the pursuit of sexual desires should not result in submission to an undesired patriarchal authority simply because she "burns with youth." Oothoon continues to a point of anger and criticism, calling to the "modest virgin": "...com'st thou forth...knowing to dissemble / With nets found under thy night pillow, to catch virgin joy, / And brand it with the name of whore;" (161-163). This statement reveals the importance of the fulfilment of desire in the pursuit of achieving joy. It displays the wrongfulness in the attempt to restrict an individual from pursuing whatever desire his or her Energy may instill in him or her.

"Visions of the Daughters of Albion" does not conclude with any

form of resolution. Instead, Oothoon continues to deny her lapse of purity as understood by Theotormon, and Bromion continues to believe in his possession over her, resulting in oppression. Thus, Blake conveys his own objections to the inhibition of human perception to the point that it is reduced to nothing more than what the five senses can discern. The expressed opinions of the characters indicate Blake's belief that this definition of Reason results in the permissibility of oppression based on what men in a patriarchal society observe as pure or impure. Blake effectively parallels the conception of reason as the observable, the way this conception contributes to the understanding of identity, and the

way it ultimately leads to the belief that—due to an individual's spiritual qualities resulting from the embodiment of that individual—any idea of purity deviating from that of the patriarchal conception justifies oppression.

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